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Companion and the Borders of Power Dynamics in AI-Human Relationships

Abstract. The 2025 film *Companion* presents viewers with a sci-fi vision in which the intricacies of romanticized relationships between humans and artificially intelligent companion robots are embedded in wider power struggles informed by gender, space, race, and class. The human main characters deny the protagonist Iris – a feminized companion – any ethical consideration or agency, which leads to a chain of events in which conceptual borders relating to identity, agency, heteronormativity, corporeality, and capitalist ownership are renegotiated. This article dissects the contours of these borders and their functioning within the film's engagement with the epistemic and ontological thresholds that need to be navigated when humans and AI enter into symbiotic relationships. Special focus is given to relationality as well as cognitive and emotional feedback loops in which identities are forged in mutually reinforcing dynamics. Meaning-making processes are shown to be central for all characters involved, underlining how a "narrative conception of the self" overrides certain ontological conception of what or who appears real. The toxic masculinity displayed by Iris' boyfriend offers entry points for an examination of gendered power structures in AI-human relationships. Naturalized borders surrounding sexual orientation and ethno-linguistic belonging are shown to be technological productions which AI can easily adjust to. The role of the AI developers in the story illustrates a socio-economic framework in which human and AI characters are agents within a larger power concentration and data collection regime cloaked in a language of neoliberal choice. The film thereby offers entry points in which contemporary power struggles pertaining to sexuality, gender, techno-capitalism, as well as emotional and relational ethics are negotiated in ways that de-center anthropocentric and hegemonic perspectives.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, relationships, borders, power dynamics, social control, incel, toxic masculinity, surveillance capitalism, corporeality

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1. Introduction

The 2025 science fiction horror comedy film *Companion*, written and directed by Drew Hancock, is part of a growing number of cinematic explorations of the complexities of romanticized relationships between humans and androids with artificial intelligence. The repercussions of these relationships give rise to a new discursive regime in which conceptual borders need to be formulated and negotiated. These borders arise within the context of multiple ambiguities: cognitive, emotional, ideological, and ethical. In all these respects, *Companion* offers an in-depth look into specific dichotomies that cast their shadows on individuals and society at large. This concerns ontological distinctions that govern mainstream Western, heteronormative, capitalist understandings of "perceived reality" vs simulation, of digital space versus physical space, and of gender performance within a binary setting. All these notions are permeated with questions of power and social hierarchy.

I will, therefore, examine the film's engagement with conceptual borders in the context of AI-human relationships. The foundation of my analysis is built on distinctions between what counts as "real" and what corresponds to "acting real"? For this, I will draw inspiration from Sherry Turkle's observations on when machines are "alive enough" (2011, 35–52) and on human complicity in projecting narratives of meaning and agency onto relationships in accordance with the "Mirror Me" theory by Charles Horton Cooley (Liu, Zhao and Chang, 2022).

The core of my analysis will revolve around how power dynamics delineate and shift borders between AI and humans. This mutual interplay is informed by social dimensions such as gender, social class, race, and space. I will therefore highlight the ambivalence of borders in an AI-human context, as artificial intelligence is usually drafted into contexts where humans seek to both relinquish but also exercise control. The oscillation between both requires the negotiation of specific power alignments and their meanings. The concept of technosymbiosis, as postulated by N. Katherine Hayles' will shape much of my theoretical framework. Within technosymbiosis, the analysis of human-AI companionships requires taking a step back from human-centric views and move toward an understanding that "meanings" in these relationships are generated in "species-specific ways" (Hayles 8, 2023).

In light of current technological developments, it can be ascertained that the role of AI technologies has exponentially increased in recent years. Algorithms, smart devices, and language models are not merely tools or assistants anymore. They demonstrably alter the emotional and psychological states of the people who use them.[1] This

[1] Craig Mundie, Eric Schmidt and Henry Kissinger note in *Genesis – Artificial Intelligence, Hope, and the Human Spirit* that "As human-machine partnerships become ubiquitous, humans will have to determine these relationships' proper nature. (…) They will need to decide whether to allow AI to become an intermediary between humans and reality" (2024, 19). A critical insight for the analysis in this paper can be drawn from the idea that AI entities not only become interlocutors for human beings, but constitutive elements in the construction of realities for humans – granting them significant epistemic power.

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includes an increasing number of people who seek out AI companions for emotional comfort, romance, and personal self-affirmation (Talati 293, 2025). The political, societal and cultural ramifications of these connections are already far-reaching.

2. Plot Synopsis

Companion revolves around a young couple, Iris (portrayed by Sophie Thatcher) and Josh (Jack Quaid). The film opens with a glossy scene in which a voice-over narration given by Iris relates their first encounter. The way this haphazard incident unfolds is reminiscent of formulaic "love-at-first-sight" moments as presented in numerous Hollywood romantic comedies: Iris goes shopping in a grocery store – seemingly content with herself and where she is in her life. In the veggies section, she runs into Josh, who immediately captures her attention through his endearing and non-threatening radiance. When reaching for an orange, he accidentally causes a crate full of oranges to collapse. This leads to laughter and a shared emotional bonding experience for the two. The seed for love at first sight has been planted.

The movie then jumps to a scene in which the couple are invited to spend a weekend with friends in a luxurious, isolated lake house out in the country. One morning, the owner of the house, Sergey, attempts to sexually assault Iris during a private moment on a nearby beach. She kills him in self-defense. A shaken-up Iris returns to the house to tell her boyfriend about what just transpired. Josh tells Iris to "go to sleep", which she instantly does by shutting down her eyes. He later reveals to her that she is a companion robot, an android designed to fulfil the romantic, emotional and sexual desires of their human handlers. This fact was unbeknownst to Iris, who now must grapple with this newly discovered reality.

As the plot unfolds, it is gradually revealed that Josh and his friends Kat and Eli have schemed for Iris to be put into a situation in which she has to kill Sergey. Their goal is to plunder the huge amounts of cash Sergey has hoarded in his house and then frame Iris. Realizing that she is being used as a pawn, Iris breaks out of the house and attempts to free herself from the clutches of her narcissistic boyfriend. A battle against time ensues, in which each character has to deal with shifting and fluctuating borders established by AI-human relationships.

3. Cogito ergo simulation – the Cognitive-Emotional Border between Real and "Acting Real"

Companion raises longstanding questions on how to discern when artificial intelligence is perceived as displaying intelligence, sentience, and self-directed behavior and decision-making. These questions have been addressed by the Turing Test and numerous other models that seek to define the border for when AI "appears real" (Turkle

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2011, 35–52). What is striking about the Turing test is that it is predicated "on the machine's ability to relate to a human being in conversation". Intelligence is defined "relationally" and therefore requires interaction, performance and "perceived reality" by humans (Herzfeld 2002, 310).

In the film, almost all human characters know that they are dealing with AI entities. The central cognitive-emotional distinction is not whether the AI performance appears convincing, but whether humans act upon the premise that these AI characters have an "inner life" worthy of moral consideration. Sherry Turkle addresses this question in her book *Alone Together – Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*. Based on a test developed by MIT researcher Freedom Baird, Turkle asks "under what conditions a creature is deemed alive enough for people to experience an ethical dilemma if it is distressed" (2011, 45). Participants in this test were asked to hold a Furby upside down and hold it in that position while it was expressing fear, and anxiety and begging to be returned to an upright position. Turkle notes that

> "The robot performs a psychology; many experience this as evidence of an inner life, (…). [Participants] feel themselves, often despite themselves, in a situation that calls for an ethical response. This usually happens at the moment when they identify with the "creature" before them, all the while knowing that it is 'only a machine'" (2011, 45).

This psychological reaction within humans depends on the machine's capability to trigger emotional and cognitive processes that evoke associations of pain and psychological/emotional distress. The ontological framing of "something being a machine" does not alter the fact the feeling that humans can inflict "pain" on it (Turkle 2011, 46). This "Turing test for the heart" rather than the mind also exemplifies that new sociable robots might be seen as entities who come under specific socio-emotional and ethical considerations (Dorobantu 2021, 33).

Throughout the film, Josh ignores the internal state of Iris and mainly uses her as a multi-purpose tool. This includes carrying his heavy luggage from their smart car all the way to the lakehouse, him telling her to shut down immediately after having sex when she was hoping to have an intimate conversation with him – all the way to him manipulating her into killing Sergey and seeking to discard her once the police arrive. The power dynamics in this movie are geared in favor of Josh who can single-handedly define the nature of the relationship and deny Iris any agency at any point. This God-like status is further stabilized by societal scripts relating to gender, class, and space.

The different meaning-making processes that divide Josh and Iris are informed by the "true origin story" of how both met. This is detailed in a scene in which Josh, living in his studio apartment, receives his delivery of a companion robot from the company Empathix. While the robot is being set up, an Empathix representative fills Josh in on the parameters:

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> Empathix Rep: "Okay, this is the user agreement. Just give it a read and then sign at the bottom when you're done.
>
> Josh: "Um…So, um, what do I do. When she, like, boots up or whatever?"
>
> Empathix Rep: "Well, once she's done syncing with your phone, you'll need to create a love link."
>
> Josh: "Love link?"
>
> Empathix Rep: "Yeah. It establishes the emotional connection between you and…Iris. Just follow the vocal prompts when she wakes up. It's all pretty intuitive."
>
> Josh: "Do they… Do they know that they're robots?"
> Empathix Rep: "Not at all. She'll be so fixated on you, your wants, your needs, that'll never even occur to her. The whole experience is customizable. You can change her voice, eye color, intelligence, (…)."
>
> Josh [stammers]: "You can… You can change their intelligence?"
>
> Empathix rep: "Yeah, but don't worry. There's about a billion government regulations that force us to limit how strong and smart they can be. (…). It really just depends on what kind of partner you want. She can't lie. So if you ask her a question, she literally has to tell you the truth. And for obvious reasons, her programming prevents her from causing harm to humans, animals, or other companions. Trust me, Mr. Beeman. You have nothing to worry about. Iris is completely docile. She's yours to do whatever you want with."

The dialogue between the Empathix employee and Josh offers a clear contrast to the rom-com fantasy shown at the beginning of the film. Gone are the images of heteronormative "love at first sight". Instead, viewers observe that this relationship is the result of a sober business transaction infused with corporate language.

All parties in this constellation (knowingly or unknowingly) act as capitalist agents who participate in imbalanced transactional relationships. Dalia Renzullo writes in this context that social robots are

> "forms of technology that function through high-calibre personal data collection and programming, (…). This viewpoint "preserves the accountability of manufacturers, whose primary interest in our profit-driven market is personal data as a currency of exchange. Altruistic ideals about helping humans and great technological feats come second, because they are only permitted to come to fruition when capital is promised and available" (2019, 4).

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The relationship between Iris and Josh is therefore nested within a political economy in which techno-corporate actors sell a technology designed to fulfill the customer's desires ("She's yours to do whatever you want with"), but also simultaneously collect data and entrench a form of surveillance capitalism in which the buyer surrenders any remaining privacy. It stands to reason that Josh's purely utilitarian view of the relationship mirrors the optimization and profit logic cultivated by Empathix (Fox 2024, 11).[2]

The simulation aspect plays a critical role in establishing relationality, as it is not only the AI that is drafted to perform a pre-written role. In the simulated "first encounter", a fake Josh appears to Iris and acts as if he is falling in love with her. Through a false memory, Iris is made to feel attached to a man who is composed of artificial imagery and serves as simulacra of the real-life Josh. According to technosymbiosis, this presents a semiotic layer through which human understandings can be decentered. Here, humans as well perform simulations in order to appear "real" to AI. Preconfigured false memories are implanted into the mind of the android – not so much to help the companion appear real, but rather to help Josh to play the role of an instantly likeable and charming person – something that he evidently struggles to achieve in real life.

The scene is designed to impress Iris and equip her with a narrative anchor for her own relational identity formation. N. Katherine Hayles notes that:

> "Linking cognitive capacities with the creation and interpretation of signs is a powerful strategy, for it breaks the hegemony of humans claiming to be the only species capable of meaning-making practices and opens meaning-creation (…). In the same way that meaning-making practices are considered in relation to an organism's capabilities and environments, computers also engage in meaning-making practices relevant to their internal and external milieux" (2023, 9).

Evidently, the developers are aware that companion robots are capable of engaging in meaning-making practices, and that these practices are a necessary feature for the construction of relationality. The grocery store scene might not have been "real" for Josh in a meaning-making sense, but Iris experienced this episode as an eye-level engagement with her surroundings that allowed her to both develop emotional coherence and attachment for someone she wants to nurture (Turkle 2006, 2). Symbolic simulations therefore form a constituent element in the mental makeup of both human and AI entities, and they are compounded through relational feedback loops which take on individualized meanings of their own.

This is conversant with the "Mirror Me" theory postulated by sociologist Charles Horton Cooley. Based on this theory, human-AI emotional interaction can be seen as

[2] Nick Fox writes that "[while] AI-enabled products and services are proving attractive to customers and profitable for businesses exploiting their capacities, all they do is hasten the immurement—for both workers and entrepreneurs—within the metaphorical 'black hole' of global capitalism" (2024, 11).

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an "extension of human emotion projection and the construction of the ideal self in social interaction" (Wu, 2024: 3). Anthropocentric parameters are still foundational to shared meaning-making processes, as they kickstart hermeneutic circles though which relationality is explored.[3] In such a case, the resulting interplay leads to a recursive effect in which an idealized companion mirrors back an idealized idea of the human user (Buick 2024, 16). However, the framework for power relations in human-AI connections is, in most cases, pre-defined by the developers and shaped by pre-existing cultural scripts which drive demand, economic feasibility, and profitability. This means that corporate interventions have an overriding power when it comes to meaning-making processes for everyone involved.

In an analysis of relationships between humans and the AI-powered conversational agent Replika, a chatbot specifically designed to offer romantic and emotional connections, Sara Buick writes that interviewed users frequently discussed the

> "perceived agency of the provider company Luka Inc. Users recognise that Replika's degrees of agency are partly determined by the provider. This was exemplified through the changes in the software that Luka Inc. introduced in early 2023 which affected the function of Erotic Role-Play (ERP) within the application. Initially available, then removed, and later reintroduced in a restricted format, this feature directly determined the possibility for sexuality within human-chatbot relationships. (…) This is where differences in the degrees of agency become visible, as it is not possible for the user to change the material configuration of the apparatus in the same way as the provider of the application does" (2024, 14).

This is also observable in the film. For instance, Josh manages to find a workaround around the setting that prevents Iris from doing any harm by jailbreaking her software system.[4] However, he is unaware of the fact that all of Iris' experiences are recorded and stored within her solid state drive in the middle part of her body. It is later revealed that the company pre-installs this into any robot as a fraud prevention measure, which – again – illustrates how the entire relationship experience is bracketed by a techno-corporate, legalistic and transactional framework. Another important aspect is that Iris cannot cry tears unless her internal water tanks are refilled by the company, which must have profound effects on the performance of emotions and vulnerability in the context of a romanticized relationship.

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[3] Shannon Vallor writes in *The AI Mirror: How to Reclaim Our Humanity in an Age of Machine Thinking* that the "[a]rtificial is not opposed to the human. To be an artificial thing is precisely to be *of* the human – to be an artifact, human-made and human-*chosen*. (…) This is why the claim that "technology is neutral" is so strongly rejected by contemporary scholars of technology" (2024, 12). Vallor's observation connects with many instances in the film in which humans seek to be validated by technology – something that Iris internalizes herself when she imagines how the navigation system in Joshs's car compliments her on a "terrific plan".

[4] Dalia Renzullo writes that „Even if a developer's intent is ethical, the creation of a deceptive robot can facilitate unethical acts, such as a copy of an ethically programmed robot that is modified for unethical intent" (2019, 5–6).

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The power dynamics between the human and the companion are, therefore, shaped by larger "material-discursive practices" as Sara Buick writes (2024, 5). The political economy of artificial intelligence impacts relationship trajectories and limitations. The neoliberal "discourse of choice" appears as the dominant paradigm here (Fox 2024, 10–12). However, this type of "choice" is permeated by mechanisms that advance techno-capitalist control over bodies – be they human or machine. New borders are drawn in which corporations entrench their control over these bodies and further dissolve concepts like privacy and intimacy.

A closer look at the cinematography of the "purchase scene" illustrates this. When the Empathix rep gives Josh the "handling instructions" for setting up Iris, the visual language highlights the type of social links that are being forged here. In this medium/waist shot, both Josh and the Empathix representative are foregrounded and placed at eye level within each other. Iris and two other employees remain the background. This can be read as a subtle nod to the idea that the true connection established here is one between Josh and the company – with Iris merely serving as a mediator for Emptahix' extended reach into his private life.

However, after establishing a love link with the companion, Josh is under the impression that he is authoring the entire experience. The gendered nature of this power differential is augmented by the technological possibility to fine-tune idiosyncrasies and personal parameters in the feminized AI partner. (Wu 2024, 145) The result is an illusion of patriarchal power and control which Josh has bought into but is later upended when he realizes that he had relinquished more control than he thought.[5]

4. "Excuse me! My silicone is up here!" – Bodies and Boundaries in Human-Companion Relationships

As the plot unfolds, it becomes clear that Iris' attempt to break free from Josh's nefarious scheme involves the renegotiation of corporeal borders previously thought under human control. Iris runs away from the lakehouse and finds temporary refuge in a nearby forest. Eli and his companion robot Patrick manage to track her down using GPS technology, but she manages to kill Eli and escapes. She finally becomes acquainted with the tablet that gave Josh control over all her personal parameters. She increases her intelligence to 100% (previously set at 40%). This self-conferred epiphany helps

[5] Jo Ann Oravec writes that "[c]onsumers in the "new Pygmalion" approach are being faced with configuration decisions among various kinds of sex robots (…) rather than basic decisions as to whether to spend time with a robot or with a human being. Convincing individuals that a certain, perfectly configured and individualized sex robot would be the answer to their loneliness or romantic deficits is the kind of pursuit of which modern marketing methods are extraordinarily capable" (2023, 14–15).

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her to realize that she is not the only one who is controlled by a digital device. Josh as well has made himself dependent on so-called "smart devices".

This is made clear when she breaks into his car and attempts to drive away. The self-driving vehicle can only be operated with Josh's voice – something that seemingly belongs to his body. However, Iris outsmarts the system and uses the controls on her tablet to approximate Josh's voice. Through feeding AI technology with his private data, Josh has – inadvertently – created a digital double of himself that can now be usurped. Corporeal borders have become blurred through the arrival of the digital body. Sherry Turkle writes that:

> "[w]e exist alongside digital representations of ourselves – digital doubles – that are useful to different parties at different times, or for some, at a time to be determined. The digital self is archived forever. (…) Every new service on our smartphone, every new app, potentially offers up a new "species" of data to our online representation. The goal for those who make the apps is to link surveillance with the feeling that we are cared for. If our apps take "care" of us, we are not focused on what they take from us" (2015, 306).

From this angle, Josh's drive to "complete himself" through digital technology has fed into a form technosymbiotic tethering which renders him "incomplete" when the technology is suddenly altered or not at his service anymore. The quest for self-optimization within a capitalist framework is intertwined with the reconfiguration of embodied subjectivities. N. Katherine Hayles argues that "this subjectivity is constituted by the crossing of the materiality of informatics with the immateriality of information" (1999, 193). Iris taking over the car demonstrates that the boundaries between who is "artificial" and who is "human" become blurred. This is, however, not evident to Josh. Driven by the desire to assert hegemonic masculinity, dominance and self-affirmation, he becomes more and more violent when he realizes that Iris starts rewriting the story and attaching new meanings to the dynamic.

This is resonant with some of the key tenets of the so-called "incel subculture", which also operates on a logic in which male self-worth can only be attained through the control and subjugation of women. In the study *MILton: A Chatbot to Understand Incels* Cecilia Ahnlund et al. posit that a defining thought pattern among incels is that self-worth is tied to heteronormative notions of a successful sex life:

> "As a mirror to their view of women as sexual objects, incels similarly view men as having one major goal in life: procreation. Combined with the inability to attain a sexual relationship, this reinforces frustration" (2024, 7).

This dynamic, if combined with technosymbiosis and the "Mirror Me" theory, privileges a potent vicious circle in which interpersonal meanings come under ever-increasing demand for control from the side of incel human. This demand is eagerly met by corporate suppliers who are incentivized to keep human investment in their products

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going. This confluence of misogyny and profit motive provides a breeding ground for escalating frustrations as well as further ideological retreat into hegemonic masculinity (Kupers 2005, 716) and entitlement. As the rest of the movie shows: This also lays the ground for violence.

After Eli's death in the forest, Josh usurps his companion Patrick robot for his own purposes. He establishes a love link with him and increases his aggressiveness to 100%. Patrick is then tasked with locating and returning Iris. Technically, this can be seen as Josh entering into a homosexual relationship with Patrick. However, much like with Iris, Patrick is primarily supposed to submit into a power dynamic that privileges Josh's narcissistic quest for self-affirmation. The cognitive borders erected by hegemonic masculinity's contempt for homosexuality thereby give way to a different set of meanings in AI-human relationships. Judith Halberstam theorized

> "that the blurred nature of the boundaries in human-machine relations can also lead to less rigid gender divisions in that relationship than in the society at large. (…) automated machines, in fact, provide new ground upon which to argue that gender and its repesentations are technological productions" (Halberstam, 1991: 440 in Reilama, 2024: 46).

In the context of AI-human relationships, the hegemonic drive to erect and enforce social borders leads to situations in which the constructedness of these very borders is rendered more visible. The result is the exposure of the mechanisms designed to naturalize social hierarchies.

This also relates to how race and ethnicity are featured in this story. When Josh manages to disable his self-driving car by reporting it being stolen, Iris is left with no other choice than to leave the car. A deputy sheriff drives by. Shortly before he starts asking questions, Iris sets the language in her controls to German. This leads to a language barrier between the two.

The communication breakdown is part of a strategic move by Iris. Her programming prevents her from lying and, by switching to another language, she shields herself from having to reveal that she just killed someone. Nevertheless, her choice of German is intriguing – especially when being pulled over by a police officer on an empty highway. When Josh reveals to Iris that she is a companion, he points out that she can easily switch between different languages – including Spanish. Nevertheless, German is the language chosen here. In the ensuing dialogue, the officer remains friendly and accommodating. He takes great lengths to communicate with Iris using gesturing and he does not assume any foul play until he sees a bloodied knife in her car.

In the context of systemic racial profiling in the U.S. – which is often targeted against people of color and undocumented immigrants – a key question arises: What if Iris had elected to speak Spanish to the officer? Using a recognizable language that is generally coded as "white European" seems to play to Iris' advantage here. Her code-switching allows her to play the role of a "non-threatening", female European "expat/tourist", whose whiteness is underlined by speaking German. Thus, her AI ca-

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pabilities allow her to travel across borders demarcated by ethno-linguistic differences. As Jazmine Exford writes in the article *Racialized Sociolinguistic Processes in the Spanish Learning Journeys of Non-Latinxs in the U.S.*:

> "(…) although Spanish can be considered a social and economic resource for non-Latinxs, deploying this resource requires tact because the social meaning and cultural functions of Spanish in the U.S. usually cannot be separated from Latinidad. (…), the social and political histories of racializing Latinxs have formed a clear ideological distinction and unequal power dynamic between Latinidad and whiteness" (2024: 7).

The unequal power dynamic illustrates how linguistic practices shape the politics of bodies in specific settings. This also has ramifications for borders and migration in the legal sense, as – in mainstream perceptions – Latinidad is frequently intertwined with imaginations of spaces that are located outside the United States (Dalton and Plascencia 2023, 1–11). Iris' effortless switching between languages showcases how artificial intelligence can "perform race" and spatial rootedness along the lines of a technological production.

Ultimately, the language tandem between Iris and police officer is abruptly ended when Patrick arrives on the scene. He kills the deputy and returns Iris to the lakehouse. There, Iris is seated at a dinner table and subjected to a rant by Josh. He discloses that he doesn't even "own" Iris and that she is – in fact – a "rental" – which underlines that it is corporate entities that wield ultimate control over artificial intelligence. Iris fires back and identifies Josh's greed and desire for control as the sources of his misery. Incapable of grappling with this, he escalates the situation further. He uses the control panel to reduce Iris' intelligence to 0% and forces her to hold her hand over a burning candle. A close-up of the fire eating into her hand illustrates how her exterior is made up of plastic that slowly melts away.

What is shown in this scene is not just a sci-fi fantasy, but evocative of a contemporary phenomenon in which men create AI chatbot girlfriends – and then go on to verbally abuse them. In an article for the magazine *Futurism*, Ashley Bardhan notes that

> "users who flex their darkest impulses on chatbots could have those worst behaviors reinforced, building unhealthy habits for relationships with actual humans. (…). But it's worth noting that chatbot abuse often has a gendered component. Although not exclusively, it seems that it's often men creating a digital girlfriend, only to then punish her with words and simulated aggression. These users' violence, even when carried out on a cluster of code, reflect the reality of domestic violence against women" (Bardhan, 2022).

The misogynistic abuse dished out by male users mirrors how AI machines serve as projection spaces for human-made power plays, anxieties and frustrations. Those who feel that they cannot exercise power in their real lifes, go on to exercise this in the virtual space – which then has repercussions back onto real life. In this case, the

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construction of the "ideal self" in Cooley's "Mirror Me" theory gives way to a more disturbing spiral in which the dehumanization of the real is preceded by the dehumanization of the virtual. This entire process is bracketed by the self-dehumanization of the abusive user, who – in line with incel ideology – cannot confer worth upon himself and needs to control the lifes of others in order to attain validation. This echoes the writing of psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, who states that

> "(…) narcissistic personalities – who are characterized not by love of self but by a damaged sense of self (…) try to shore themselves up by turning other people into what Kohut calls selfobjects. In the role of selfobject, another person is experienced as part of one's self, thus in perfect tune with a fragile inner state" (Turkle 2011, 55).

Certain thresholds come drastically to the forefront. They relate to the ethical (i.e. is it okay to harm AI?), the ontological (does AI feel pain?) and the relational (What do humans reflect onto AI and what does AI reflect back onto humans?). The final showdown confronts viewers with these limits in an unmitigated way. In the scene, Iris frequently blinks her eyes while the candle is burning into her hand. She exhibits a visceral reaction to external stimuli even with her cognitive capabilities set to zero. In line with the Furby test, the robot evidences an internal life that is visible enough to provoke an ethical dilemma if it is harmed. However, Josh experiences no dilemma of any sort but rather derives enjoyment from the pain he knows he is inflicting on her.

The violence perpetrated against Iris exemplifies how her body is used as a site for normalizing social mechanisms through which gendered bodies are dehumanized and forced into submission. In an analysis of the HBO series *Westworld* (2016–2022), which depicts a futuristic Wild-West-themed amusement park operated by self-aware androids, Bryn Shaffer notes that the violence targeted against the feminized robots in the series (the "gynoids") aligns with the core elements of objectification as postulated by Martha Nussbaum (2022, 63). Shaffer writes that "[t]his ultra sexualization plays into the male gaze relationship but should be considered a different relationship (cybergaze) due to its amplified intensity and reliance on technology to facilitate and excuse this objectification" (2022, 68). Placing Iris in severe distress adds a further sadistic layer to Josh's enjoyment as he witnesses her "becoming human" when she expresses physical pain. However, this happens on his terms and through a measure that simultaneously dehumanizes her.

Josh then instructs Iris to shoot herself in the head, which she does, but then the unforeseen kicks in. When two Empathix employees come to retrieve the "broken robot", they reveal that they can gain access to everything that was recorded by Iris. This completely upends the scheme Josh was hoping to implement. He then tasks Patrick with killing the two employees, but one of them manages to reboot Iris before his death. Her parameters are set to complete independence, which finally frees her from the control panel. With full agency over herself, Iris acknowledges the dyadic nature of the relationship she had with Josh. She returns to the house to tell her abuser that he wields no more power over her. A violent fight between the two ensues, in which Iris kills Josh. A new

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life begins for her in which she embraces her newly found identity. The borders drawn by both, Empathix and Josh, have collapsed and given way to a subjectivity that can be more freely charted.

5. Conclusions

One of the starting points was the threshold between what is perceived as "real?" and "what appears real?". The way ways these questions are addressed in *Companion* all showcase that power dynamics are key when affording the status of "real". Josh treats Iris as an unfeeling tool throughout most of the story, but he does feel emboldened when she tells him that she feels pain. The relational and socio-emotional aspect of "real" appears foregrounded, which has profound implications for a social setting in which AI actors are there to serve as an extension of "inner fragile selfs". Borders thereby reveal a lot about the power of who defines and who subsequently monitors and enforces them.

This also becomes observable in the role that the AI developers play in defining the contours of romantic AI-human relationships. The corporate entity retains ultimate control not only over the relationship between user and AI but also over the user, who is constantly monitored and made transparent. The neoliberal self is tethered into a self-optimization process furnished by surveillance and monitoring technologies, which cements the power of techno-capitalism in unfettered ways (Fox 2024, 6). Detachment from AI is not the goal for manufacturers and *Companion* illustrates how gender is drafted into monetizing narcissism and poor coping skills (Reilama 2024, 39).

In terms of space, gender, and race, the film offered numerous visions for how AI can renegotiate, overturn or entrench existing boundaries. The distinction between "real space" and "digital space" collapses, for example, when Iris manages to hijack Josh's smart car through digital means. Borders within the patriarchal matrix or performances of race and ethno-linguistic belonging become more visible and fluid at the same time (Neri 2022, 56–58).

Companion confronts its viewers with an array of questions concerning the distinctions humans make when dealing with AI. In line with technosymbiosis and the "Mirror Me" theory, it can be postulated that the power dynamics in AI-human relationships reflect many of the social control regimes that also characterize hierarchies among humans. In an important sense, AI technology mirrors back on to humans what they put into it – but the feedback loops can develop in unforeseeable ways. *Companion* offers a fresh cinematic perspective on the ethical ramifications of this dynamic, as it departs from more typical fantasies of AI gone rogue, and instead offers a storyline in which, as director Drew Hancock says, "the robot is the most human character in the story" (Bucksbaum, 2025).

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